

THE POSTMETHOD ERA: TOWARD INFORMED APPROACHES

OBJECTIVES After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- understand the concept of "postmethod" in a historical context
- apply principles of communicative language teaching to your understanding of an interactive language classroom
- distinguish among a variety of different approaches
- analyze the extent to which tenets of one or more approaches can enlighten your classroom methodology

The history of language teaching depicted in the previous chapter, characterized by a series of "methodical" milestones, had changed its course by the end of the 1980s. The profession had learned some profound lessons from our past wanderings. We had learned to be cautiously eclectic in making enlightened choices of teaching practices that were solidly grounded in the best of what we knew about second language learning and teaching. We had amassed enough research on learning and teaching that we could indeed formulate an integrated approach to language-teaching practices. And, perhaps ironically, the methods that were such strong signposts of our century-old journey were no longer of great consequence in marking our progress. How did that happen?

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a good deal of hoopla about the "designer" methods described in Chapter 2. Even though they weren't widely adopted as standard methods, they were nevertheless symbolic of a profession at least partially caught up in a mad scramble to invent a new method when the very concept of "method" was eroding under our feet. By the early 1990s it was readily apparent that we didn't need a new method. We needed, instead, to get on with the business of unifying our **approach** to language teaching and of designing effective tasks and techniques that were informed by that approach.

Perhaps the spirit of those times was best captured by the notion of a **postmethod** era of language teaching, a concept that continues to be used in pedagogical circles today (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2006b; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Kumaravadivelu (1994), Clarke (1994), and Brown (1993), among others, expressed the need to put to rest the limited concept of method as it was used in the last century, and instead to focus on what Kumaravadivelu (2006b) calls a "pedagogy of particularity," by which he means being "sensitive to a particular group of teachers

teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular social milieu" (p. 538). A soundly conceived pedagogical approach underlies such attention to the particularities of contexts.

And so, today those clearly identifiable and enterprising methods are an interesting if not insightful contribution to our professional repertoire, but few practitioners look to any one of them, or their predecessors, for a final answer on how to teach a foreign language. Method, as a unified, finite set of design features, is now given only minor attention. Instead, as noted in the previous chapter, the notion of **methodology** nevertheless continues to be viable, as it is in any other behavioral science, as the systematic application of validated principles to practical contexts.

In all this discussion of method, you do well to keep in mind the comments of the previous chapter, namely, that some of the debate is simply a matter of semantics. Bell (2003) astutely observed that we have too many definitions attached to the same word. He suggested that methods with a lowercase *m* can mean any of a wide variety of classroom practices, while Methods with an uppercase *M* seem to connote a "fixed set of classroom practices that serve as a prescription" (p. 326). On the other hand, Richards and Rodgers (2001), as noted in the previous chapter, use the same term as an umbrella to comprise approach, design, and procedure. What are we to make of this confusion? Bell (2003) is joined by Larsen-Freeman (2000), among others, who remain comfortable with maintaining the notion of methods (with a small *m*) as long as we are clear about the referent. "Postmethod need not imply the end of methods but rather an understanding of the limitations of the notion of method and a desire to transcend those limitations" (Bell, 2003, p. 334).

So perhaps the profession has attained a modicum of maturity where we recognize that the diversity of language learners in multiple worldwide contexts demands an eclectic blend of tasks, each tailored for a specified group of learners studying for particular purposes in geographic, social, and political contexts. David Nunan (1991b, p. 228) summed it up nicely: "It has been realized that there never was and probably never will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself."

THE DYSFUNCTION OF THE THEORY-PRACTICE DICHOTOMY

The now discarded concept of method (with a capital *M*) as a discrete set of unified techniques designed to meet a variety of contexts carried with it, in some opinions (Clarke, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2006b), an implicit assumption about the relationship between what we have customarily called "theory" and "practice." By **theory**, professional journals and books sometimes implied a creator, or theorist, who carried out research and proposed the rudiments of an organized set of

hypotheses, and sometimes then further proposed a methodological "application" of the theory (hence the perhaps misguided term, "applied linguistics"). The **practice** part of the formula was thought to be the province of classroom teachers who all too gladly accepted the theorist's pronouncements, which came in the form of a method. The relationship between the theorist and practitioner was (and in some cases, still is) similar to that of a producer of goods and a consumer or customer.

Mark Clarke (1994) very eloquently argued against such a relationship in analyzing the "dysfunction" of the theory-practice relationship. He and others since then (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) offer strong arguments against perpetuating this "misleading dualism" (Hedgcock, 2002, p. 308). Not only does such an understanding promote the notion of "a privileged class of theorists and an underprivileged class of practitioners" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 166), but it also connotes a separation of researchers and teachers and, at worst, a one-way communication line from the former to the latter.

Recent work in the language-teaching profession shows a marked departure from the artificial dichotomy of theory and practice (Bailey, 2001; Johnson, 1999; McKay, 2006; Murphy & Byrd, 2001). In this newer mode of viewing the profession, teachers *are* researchers and are charged with the responsibility of reflecting on their own practice. Calls for "action research" and "classroom-based research" reflect a new and healthier attitude toward the relationship of research and practice. It has become increasingly inauthentic for university professors to generate ideas from the protective walls of an ivory tower without experiencing them in person in the classroom. Likewise, more and more teachers are engaging in the process of systematic observation, experimentation, analysis, and reporting of their own experiences in classrooms around the world. More detail on the language teacher as researcher is offered in Chapter 26 of this book.

As you continue to read on in this and following chapters, it is important to view yourself as a capable observer of your own—and others'—practice. You need not think of theorists as people that are removed from the arena of classroom reality, nor of teachers as anything less than essential participants in a dialogue. To assume a gap between theory and practice is dysfunctional indeed.

AN ENLIGHTENED, ECLECTIC APPROACH

It should be clear from the foregoing that as both an enlightened and eclectic teacher, you think in terms of a number of possible methodological options at your disposal for tailoring classes to particular contexts. Your **approach**, or rationale for language learning and teaching, therefore takes on great importance. Your approach includes a number of basic principles of learning and teaching (such as

those that will be elaborated on in the next chapter) on which you can rely for designing and evaluating classroom lessons. Your approach to language-teaching methodology is a theoretically well-informed global understanding of the process of learning and teaching. It is inspired by the interconnection of all your reading and observing and discussing and teaching, and that interconnection underlies everything that you do in the classroom.

But your approach to language pedagogy is not just a set of static principles “set in stone.” It is, in fact, a dynamic composite of energies within you that change, or should change, with your experiences in your learning and teaching. The way you understand the language-learning process—what makes for successful and unsuccessful learning—may be relatively stable across months or years, but don’t ever feel too smug. There is far too much that we do not know collectively about this process, and there are far too many new research findings pouring in, to allow you to confidently assert that you know everything you already need to know about language and language learning.

The interaction between your approach and your classroom practice is the key to dynamic teaching. The best teachers always take a few calculated risks in the classroom, trying new activities here and there. The inspiration for such innovation comes from the approach level, but the feedback that these teachers gather from actual implementation then informs their overall understanding of the teaching-learning process. Which, in turn, may give rise to a new insight and more innovative possibilities, and the cycle continues.

If you have little or no experience in teaching and are perhaps now in a teacher education program, you may feel you cannot yet describe your own approach to language learning and teaching. On the other hand, you might just surprise yourself at the intuitions you already have about the foundations of teaching. Look at the list below of potential *choices* you have in designing a lesson. On the basis of what you know so far about second language acquisition and the pedagogical process, and for a particular context you’re familiar with, think about:

- a. which side of a continuum of possibilities you would generally lean toward,
- b. why you would lean that way, and most importantly,
- c. what contextual variables might influence a change away from your general inclination.

For example, the first item below offers a choice between “meaning” and “grammar” for a focus. While you might lean toward meaning because you know that too much focus on form could detract from communicative acquisition, certain classroom objectives and tasks might demand a focus on grammar. Here is the list:

For a particular course and context you are familiar with . . .

1. Should the course focus on *meaning* or *grammar*?
2. Will my students learn best by using plenty of *analysis* or *intuition*?
3. Would it be better for my students to *think directly* in the L2 or to *use translation* from the L1?
4. Will my students benefit more from *immediate* rewards or from *long-term* rewards?
5. As a teacher should I be *tough and demanding* or *gentle and empathetic*?
6. Should my feedback to students be given *frequently* or *infrequently*, so students will develop autonomy?
7. Should a communicative course give more attention to *accuracy* or *fluency*?

Were you able to respond to these items? If you could make a choice within each item, it indicates that you do indeed have some intuitions about teaching, and perhaps the beginnings of an approach. Your approach is guided by a number of factors: your own experience as a learner in classrooms, whatever teaching experience you may already have had, classroom observations you have made, books you have read, and previous courses in the field. But more importantly, if you found that in almost every choice you wanted to add something like "but it depends on . . ." then you are on the way toward developing an *enlightened* approach to language learning and teaching. Our approaches to language teaching must always be designed for specific contexts of teaching—what Kumaravadevelu (2006b) calls a pedagogy of "particularity," as mentioned earlier. Rarely can we say with absolute certainty that some methodological set of techniques applies to all learners in all contexts for all purposes.

Your approach also will differ on various issues from that of a colleague of yours, or even a supervising teacher, just as "experts" in the field differ in their interpretations of research on learning and teaching. There are three reasons for variation at the approach level:

- a. an approach is by definition dynamic and therefore subject to alterations and modification as a result of one's observation and experience;
- b. research in second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are not conclusive, but are subject to interpretation; and
- c. we are constantly making new discoveries about language learning and teaching, as our professional stockpile of knowledge and experience builds.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Is there a currently recognized approach that is a generally accepted norm in the field? The answer depends on whom you ask. For many (Savignon, 2005, among others), **Communicative Language Teaching** (CLT) is an accepted paradigm with many interpretations and manifestations. For others (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a, for example), CLT is laden with issues of "authenticity, acceptability, and adaptability" (p. 62), and instead we are exhorted to embrace **task-based language teaching** (TBLT) as a more appropriate model. (See below for a discussion of TBLT.)

The latter arguments represent what appears to be too strong a rejection of a tradition that has been viable in many language-teaching circles for several decades. In this chapter, in order to avoid a lot of nitpicking over the nuances of difference between the two approaches, we'll look at both CLT and TBLT, and then perhaps we can allow the progression of research in the next few years to sort out the pros and cons on each point of view. Suffice it to say that no model will be sufficient to satisfy *all* the criteria for a comprehensive theory of instructed second language acquisition. As long as the language-teaching community recognizes shortcomings and seeks to remedy them in local contexts, we can still use such models as foundation stones for our pedagogy.

In the previous chapter you were introduced to a progression of methods that defined a century or more of language-teaching history. Beneath those methods lay some important theoretical assumptions. In the 1940s and 1950s, the profession was to some extent convinced that teachers could behaviorally program a scientifically ordered set of linguistic structures into the minds of learners through conditioning. In the 1960s we were quite worried about how Chomsky's generative grammar was going to fit into our language classrooms and how to inject the **cognitive code** of a language into the process of absorption. The innovativeness of the 1970s brought affective factors to the forefront of some experimental language-teaching methods. This period saw a focus on emotional and sociocultural factors operating within learners. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the beginnings of what we now recognize as a communicative approach as we better and better understood the functions that must be incorporated into a classroom. The late 1980s and 1990s saw the development of approaches that highlighted the fundamentally communicative properties of language, and classrooms were increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks.

Today we continue our professional march through history. Beyond grammatical and discourse elements in communication, we continue to probe the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for "real-life" communication in the classroom. We are trying to get our learners to develop linguistic fluency, and not just the accuracy that once consumed our predecessors. We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance "out there" when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We

are concerned with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, and not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential.

All of these theoretical interests underlie what we can best describe as CLT. It is difficult to offer a definition of CLT. It is a unified but broadly based, theoretically well-informed set of tenets about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching. From the earlier seminal works in CLT (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1978) up to more recent teacher education textbooks (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2001; Jacobs & Farrell, 2003; Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Nunan, 2003; Richard-Amato, 2003; Savignon, 2005), we have definitions enough to send us reeling. For the sake of simplicity and directness, I offer the following seven interconnected characteristics as a description of CLT:

Characteristics of a CLT Approach

1. **Overall goals.** CLT suggests a focus on *all* of the components (grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic) of communicative competence. Goals therefore must intertwine the organizational (grammatical, discourse) aspects of language with the pragmatic (functional, sociolinguistic, strategic) aspects.
2. **Relationship of form and function.** Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus, but remain as important components of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
3. **Fluency and accuracy.** A focus on students' "flow" of comprehension and production and a focus on the formal accuracy of production are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use. At other times the students will be encouraged to attend to correctness. Part of the teacher's responsibility is to offer appropriate corrective feedback on learners' errors.
4. **Focus on real-world contexts.** Students in a communicative class ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom. Classroom tasks must therefore equip students with the skills necessary for communication in those contexts.

5. **Autonomy and strategic involvement.** Students are given opportunities to focus on their own learning process through raising their awareness of their own styles of learning (strengths, weaknesses, preferences) and through the development of appropriate strategies for production and comprehension. Such awareness and action will help to develop autonomous learners capable of continuing to learn the language beyond the classroom and the course.
6. **Teacher roles.** The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and guide, not an all-knowing font of knowledge. The teacher is an empathetic "coach" who values the students' linguistic development. Students are encouraged to construct meaning through genuine linguistic interaction with other students and with the teacher.
7. **Student roles.** Students in a CLT class are active participants in their own learning process. Learner-centered, cooperative, collaborative learning is emphasized, but not at the expense of appropriate teacher-centered activity.

These seven characteristics underscore some major departures from earlier methods and approaches. In some ways those departures were a gradual product of outgrowing the numerous methods that characterized a long stretch of history. In other ways those departures were radical. Structurally (grammatically) sequenced curricula were a mainstay of language teaching for centuries. CLT suggests that grammatical structure might better be subsumed under various pragmatic categories. In CLT we pay considerably less attention to the overt presentation and discussion of grammatical rules than we traditionally did. Using a great deal of authentic language is implied in CLT, as we attempt to build fluency. It is important to note, however, that fluency should never be encouraged at the expense of clear, unambiguous, direct communication. Much more spontaneity is present in communicative classrooms: Students are encouraged to deal with unrehearsed situations under the guidance, but not control, of the teacher. The importance of learners' developing a strategic approach to acquisition is a total turnabout from earlier methods that never broached the topic of strategies-based instruction. And finally, the teacher's facilitative role in CLT and students' collaborative role are the product of two decades or more of slowly recognizing the importance of learner initiative in the classroom.

Some of the characteristics of CLT make it difficult for a nonnative-speaking teacher who might not be very proficient in the second language to teach effectively. Dialogues, drills, rehearsed exercises, and discussions (in the first language) of grammatical rules are much simpler for some nonnative-speaking teachers to contend with. This drawback should not deter one, however, from pursuing communicative goals in the classroom. Technology (such as video,

television, audio CDs, the Internet, the Web, and computer software) can aid such teachers. Moreover, in the last decade or so, we have seen a marked increase in English teachers' proficiency levels around the world. As educational and political institutions in various countries become more sensitive to the importance of teaching foreign languages for communicative purposes (not just for the purpose of fulfilling a requirement or of "passing a test"), we may be better able, worldwide, to accomplish the goals of communicative language teaching.

CLT is not by any means a brand-new approach. One of the most comprehensive lists of CLT features came a quarter of a century ago from Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, pp. 91-93) in a comparison of audiolingual methodology with what they then called the Communicative Approach. Because of its practicality, their list is reprinted in Table 3.1. In subsequent chapters, as you grapple with designing specific classroom techniques and planning lessons, you will be given chances to apply your understanding of CLT and, no doubt, to refine that understanding.

At the beginning of this section, it was noted that there are some who now argue that CLT may not be as sufficient a model as we once thought. Why the caution? Doesn't all the above make perfectly good sense? Haven't CLT principles been applied repeatedly, and successfully, in classrooms around the world? Indeed, you can with some assurance latch on to the CLT label and, like a member of a club, aver that you "believe in CLT," and be allowed to step inside the gates. But as with every issue in our field, there are caveats (see Kumaravivelu, 2006, and Kramsch, 2006, for further discussion):

1. Beware of giving lip service to principles of CLT (and related principles like cooperative learning, interactive teaching, learner-centered classes, content-centered education, whole language, etc.—see the next sections in this chapter) but not truly grounding your teaching techniques in such principles (Kramsch, 2006). Few teachers would admit to a disbelief in principles of CLT; they would be marked as heretics. But if you believe the term characterizes your teaching, then make sure you do indeed understand and practice your convictions.
2. Avoid overdoing certain CLT features: engaging in real-life, authentic language in the classroom to the exclusion of any potentially helpful controlled exercises, grammatical pointers, and other analytical devices; or simulating the real world but refraining from "interfering" in the ongoing flow of language. Such an "indirect" approach* (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrel, 1997) to CLT only offers the possibility of incidental learning without specific focus on forms, rules, and principles of language organization. A more effective application of CLT principles is manifested in a "direct" approach that carefully sequences and structures tasks for learners and offers optimal intervention to aid learners in developing strategies for acquisition.

*Howatt (1984), Littlewood (1981), and Nunan (1988) referred to this as the "strong" approach to CLT, noting that most practitioners would follow a "weak" version of CLT in which authenticity is coupled with structural and functional practice and other procedures of intervention.

Table 3.1. A comparison of the Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, pp. 91–93)

Audiolingual Method	Communicative Approach
1. Attends to structure and form more than meaning.	Meaning is paramount.
2. Demands more memorization of structure-based dialogues.	Dialogues, if used, center around communicative functions and are not normally memorized.
3. Language items are not necessarily contextualized.	Contextualization is a basic premise.
4. Language learning is learning structures, sounds, or words.	Language learning is learning to communicate.
5. Mastery or "overlearning" is sought.	Effective communication is sought.
6. Drilling is a central technique.	Drilling may occur, but peripherally.
7. Native-speaker-like pronunciation is sought.	Comprehensible pronunciation is sought.
8. Grammatical explanation is avoided.	Any device that helps the learners is accepted—varying according to their age, interest, etc.
9. Communicative activities come only after a long process of rigid drills and exercises.	Attempts to communicate are encouraged from the very beginning.
10. The use of the student's native language is forbidden.	Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible.
11. Translation is forbidden at early levels.	Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.
12. Reading and writing are deferred until speech is mastered.	Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired.
13. The target linguistic system is learned through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system.	The target linguistic system is learned through the process of struggling to communicate.
14. Linguistic competence is the desired goal.	Communicative competence is the desired goal.
15. Varieties of language are recognized but not emphasized.	Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methods.
16. The sequence of units is determined solely by principles of linguistic complexity.	Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content function or meaning that maintains interest.
17. The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory.	Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.
18. "Language is habit," so error must be prevented at all costs.	Language is often created by the individual through trial and error.
19. Accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary goal.	Fluency and acceptable language are the primary goals; accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context.
20. Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in machines or controlled materials.	Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writing.
21. The teacher is expected to specify the language that students are to use.	The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use.
22. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of language.	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

3. Remember that there are numerous interpretations of CLT. Because it is a catchall term, it is tempting to figure that everyone agrees on its definition. As already noted above, they don't. In fact, some of those in the profession, with good reason, feel uncomfortable using the term, even to the point of wishing to exorcise it from our jargon. As long as you are aware of many possible versions of CLT, it remains a term that can continue to capture current language-teaching approaches.

Closely allied to CLT are a number of concepts that have, like CLT, become bandwagon terms: task-based language teaching (which is for some a candidate for replacing the notion of CLT), learner-centered, cooperative, interactive, whole language based, and content-based, to name a few. One way of looking at these terms is that they are simply expressions for the latest fads in language teaching and are therefore relatively meaningless. But another viewpoint would embrace them as legitimate attempts to label current concerns and recent developments within a CLT framework, as overlapping and confusing as those concerns sometimes are. I believe the latter is the more reasoned perspective. However, in order to take that perspective, some explanation is in order. Hence, in the sections that follow, a number of the current CLT-related approaches are summarized.

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

One of the most prominent perspectives within the CLT framework is **Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)**. While some researchers (Kumaravadevelu, 2006a) argue that TBLT is a significantly different approach, other proponents (Ellis, 2003) would claim that TBLT is at the very heart of CLT. This approach puts the use of tasks at the core of language teaching. While there is a good deal of variation among experts on how to describe or define **task**, Peter Skehan's (1998a, p. 95) concept of task still captures the essentials. He defines task as an activity in which

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communication problem to solve;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority; and
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Perhaps more simply put, "a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001, p. 11). In some cases, task and technique may be synonymous (a problem-solving task/technique; a role-play task/technique, for example). But in other cases, a task may be comprised of several techniques (for example, a problem-solving task that includes, let's say, grammatical explanation, teacher-initiated questions, and

a specific turn-taking procedure). Tasks are usually "bigger" in their ultimate ends than techniques. No small effort is demanded in designing effective tasks, as Johnson (2003) and Nunan (2004) ably demonstrate.

Task-based teaching makes an important distinction between **target tasks**, which students must accomplish beyond the classroom, and **pedagogical tasks**, which form the nucleus of the classroom activity. Target tasks are not unlike the **functions** of language that are listed in Notional-Functional Syllabuses (see Chapter 2, here, and Chapter 8 of *PLLT*); however, they are much more specific and more explicitly related to classroom instruction. If, for example, "giving personal information" is a communicative function for language, then an appropriately stated target task might be "giving personal information in a job interview." Notice that the task specifies a context. Pedagogical tasks include any of a series of techniques designed ultimately to teach students to perform the target task; the climactic pedagogical task actually involves students in some form of simulation of the target task itself (say, through a role-play simulation in which certain roles are assigned to pairs of learners).

Pedagogical tasks are distinguished by their specific goals that point beyond the language classroom to the target task. They may, however, include both formal and functional techniques. A pedagogical task designed to teach students to give personal information in a job interview might, for example, involve

1. doing exercises in comprehension of *wh*- questions with *do*-insertion ("When do you work at Macy's?")
2. doing drills in the use of frequency adverbs ("I usually work until five o'clock.")
3. listening to extracts of job interviews
4. analyzing the grammar and discourse of the interviews
5. modeling an interview: teacher and one student
6. role playing a simulated interview: students in pairs

While you might be tempted to think that only the climactic task (#6) fulfills the criterion of pointing beyond the classroom to the real world, all of the techniques build toward enabling the students to perform the final task.

A task-based curriculum, then, specifies what a learner needs to do with the English language in terms of target tasks and organizes a series of pedagogical tasks intended to reach those goals. Be careful that you do not look at task-based teaching as a hodgepodge of useful little things that the learner should be able to do, all thrown together haphazardly into the classroom. In fact, a distinguishing feature of task-based curricula is their insistence on pedagogical soundness in the development and sequencing of tasks. The teacher and curriculum planner are called upon to consider communicative dimensions such as goal, input from the teacher, interaction, teacher and learner roles, and assessment.

Task-based instruction is not a new method. Rather, it puts task at the center of one's methodological focus. It views the learning process as a set of communicative

tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve, the purposes of which extend beyond the practice of language for its own sake. Research on task-based learning (Ellis, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Skehan, 2003) has attempted to identify types of tasks that enhance learning (such as open-ended, structured, teacher-fronted, small group, and pair work) to define task-specific learner factors (for example, roles, proficiency levels, and styles), and to examine teacher roles and other variables that contribute to successful achievement of objectives.

Task-based instruction is a perspective within a CLT framework that forces you to carefully consider all the techniques that you use in the classroom in terms of a number of important pedagogical purposes:

Characteristics of TBLT

- Tasks ultimately point learners beyond the forms of language alone to real-world contexts.
- Tasks specifically contribute to communicative goals.
- Their elements are carefully designed and not simply haphazardly or idiosyncratically thrown together.
- Their objectives are well specified so that you can at some later point accurately determine the success of one task over another.
- Tasks engage learners, at some level, in genuine problem-solving activity.

LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

This term applies to curricula as well as to specific techniques. It can be contrasted with **teacher-centered instruction**, and has received various recent interpretations. **Learner-centered instruction** includes

- techniques that focus on or account for learners' needs, styles, and goals
- techniques that give some control to the student (group work or strategy training, for example)
- curricula that include the consultation and input of students and that do not presuppose objectives in advance
- techniques that allow for student creativity and innovation
- techniques that enhance a student's sense of competence and self-worth

Because language teaching is a domain that so often presupposes classrooms where students have very little language proficiency with which to negotiate with the teacher, some teachers shy away from the notion of giving learners the "power" associated with a learner-centered approach. Such restraint is not necessary because, even in beginning level classes, teachers can offer students certain choices.

All of these efforts help to give students a sense of "ownership" of their learning and thereby add to their intrinsic motivation (see Chapters 4 and 5 for discussions of intrinsic motivation).

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

A curriculum or classroom that is **cooperative**—and therefore not **competitive**—usually involves the above learner-centered characteristics. As students work together in pairs and groups, they share information and come to each other's aid. They are a "team" whose players must work together in order to achieve goals successfully. Research has shown an advantage for cooperative learning (as opposed to individual learning) on such factors as "promoting intrinsic motivation, . . . heightening self-esteem, . . . creating caring and altruistic relationships, and lowering anxiety and prejudice" (Oxford, 1997, p. 445). Some of the challenges of cooperative learning are accounting for varied cultural expectations, individual learning styles, and personality differences and an overreliance on the first language (Crandall, 1999). (The effective implementation of cooperative learning through group work in the language classroom is a topic that is covered in detail in Chapter 12 of this book.)

Cooperative learning is sometimes thought to be synonymous with **collaborative** learning. To be sure, in a cooperative classroom the students and teachers work together to pursue goals and objectives. But cooperative learning "is more structured, more prescriptive to teachers about classroom techniques, more directive to students about how to work together in groups [than collaborative learning]" (Oxford, 1997, p. 443). In cooperative learning models, a group learning activity is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners. In collaborative learning, the learner engages "with more capable others (teachers, advanced peers, etc.), who provide assistance and guidance" (Oxford, 1997, p. 444). Collaborative learning models have been developed within social constructivist (see Chapter 1 of *PLLT*) schools of thought to promote communities of learners that cut across the usual hierarchies of students and teachers.

INTERACTIVE LEARNING

At the heart of current theories of communicative competence is the essentially **interactive** nature of communication. When you speak, for example, the extent to which your intended message is received is a factor of both your production and the listener's reception. Most meaning, in a semantic sense, is a product of negotiation, of give and take, as interlocutors attempt to communicate. Thus, the communicative purpose of language compels us to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the classroom. An interactive course or technique will provide for such negotiation. Interactive classes will most likely be found

- doing a significant amount of pair work and group work
- receiving authentic language input in real-world contexts
- producing language for genuine, meaningful communication
- performing classroom tasks that prepare them for actual language use "out there"
- practicing oral communication through the give and take and spontaneity of actual conversations
- writing to and for real audiences, not contrived ones

The theoretical foundations of interactive learning lie in what Michael Long (1985, 1996) described as the **interaction hypothesis** of second language acquisition (see *PLLT*, Chapter 10). Going beyond Stephen Krashen's (1985, 1997) concept of comprehensible input, Long and others have pointed out the importance of input and output in the development of language. As learners interact with each other through oral and written discourse, their communicative abilities are enhanced.

WHOLE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

A term that once swept through our profession and is still in common use is **whole language education**. Unfortunately, the term has been so widely and divergently interpreted that it unfortunately lost the impact that it once had (see Rigg, 1991, for an excellent review of whole language education). Initially the term came from reading research and was used to emphasize:

- a. the "wholeness" of language as opposed to views that fragmented language into its bits and pieces of phonemes, graphemes, morphemes, and words;
- b. the interaction and interconnections between oral language (listening and speaking) and written language (reading and writing); and
- c. the importance, in literate societies, of the written code as natural and developmental, just as the oral code is.

Now the term has come to encompass a great deal more. Whole language is a label that has been used to describe:

- cooperative learning
- participatory learning
- student-centered learning
- focus on the community of learners
- focus on the social nature of language
- use of authentic, natural language
- meaning-centered language

- holistic assessment techniques in testing
- integration of the “four skills”

With all these interpretations, the concept of whole language has become considerably watered down. Edelsky (1993, pp. 550–551) noted that whole language is not a recipe, and it’s not an activity that you schedule into your lesson; “it is an educational way of life. [It helps people to] build meaningful connections between everyday learning and school learning.”

It is appropriate, then, that we use the term carefully so that it does not become just another buzzword for teachers and materials developers. Two interconnected concepts are brought together in whole language:

1. The wholeness of language implies that language is not the sum of its many dissectible and discrete parts. First language acquisition research shows us that children begin perceiving “wholes” (sentences, emotions, intonation patterns) well before “parts.” Second language teachers therefore do well to help their students attend to such wholes and not to yield to the temptation to build language only from the bottom up. And since part of the wholeness of language includes the interrelationship of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), we must conscientiously integrate two or more of these skills in our classrooms.
2. Whole language is a perspective “anchored in a vision of an equitable, democratic, diverse society” (Edelsky, 1993, p. 548). Because we use language to construct meaning and to construct reality, teaching a language enables learners to understand a system of social practices that both constrain and liberate. Part of our job as teachers is to empower our learners to liberate themselves from whatever social, political, or economic forces constrain them.

CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

Content-based instruction (CBI), according to Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989, p. vii), is “the integration of content learning with language teaching aims. More specifically, it refers to the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material.” Such an approach contrasts sharply with many practices in which language skills are taught virtually in isolation from substantive content. Through CBI, language becomes the medium to convey informational content of interest and relevance to the learner. Language takes on its appropriate role as a vehicle for accomplishing a set of content goals.

A surge of interest in CBI in the 1990s resulted in widespread adoption of content-based curricula around the world, as chronicled by Brinton (2003), Stoller

(2004), Schleppegrell et al. (2004), and others, even to the point that Brinton et al.'s (1989) book was republished with an epilogue in 2003. Content-based classrooms have the potential of increasing intrinsic motivation and empowerment, since students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives. Students are pointed beyond transient extrinsic factors, like grades and tests, to their own competence and autonomy as intelligent individuals capable of actually doing something with their new language.

The challenges of CBI range from a demand for a whole new genre of textbooks and other materials to the training of language teachers to teach the concepts and skills of various disciplines, professions, and occupations, and/or to teach in teams across disciplines. Allowing the subject matter to control the selection and sequencing of language items means that you have to view your teaching from an entirely different perspective. You are first and foremost teaching geography or math or culture; secondarily you are teaching language. So you may have to become a double expert! Some team-teaching models of content-based teaching alleviate this potential drawback. In some schools a subject-matter teacher and a language teacher link their courses and curricula so that each complements the other. Such an undertaking is not unlike what Brinton et al. (1989) describe as an "adjunct" model of content-based instruction.

Can content-based teaching take place at all levels of proficiency, even beginning levels? While it is possible to argue, for example, that certain basic survival skills are themselves content-based and that a beginning level class could therefore be content-based, such an argument extends the content-based notion beyond its normal bounds. Content-based instruction usually pertains to academic or occupational instruction over an extended period of time at intermediate-to-advanced proficiency levels. Talking about renting an apartment one day, shopping the next, getting a driver's license the next, and so on is certainly useful and meaningful for beginners, but would be more appropriately called task-based than content-based.

Several models of CBI have now emerged. **Theme-based** instruction may be the most common offshoot of CBI; in this model language remains the primary aim of a course, but special attention is given to meaningful, relevant themes as a point of departure for instruction in language. **Sheltered** content instruction is a form of CBI in which the teacher of a school subject (say, science or history) modifies the presentation of material to help L2 learners process the content. A little more recently, **sustained-content language teaching** involves a focus on a "single content area, or carrier topic ... [along with] a complementary focus on L2 learning and teaching" (Murphy & Stoller, 2001, p. 3). Here, the L2 classroom simulates the structure and demands of mainstream courses but adds explicit instruction in language and academic skills. All three models are derived from the principle that students' meaningful involvement in relevant content will enhance acquisition.

OTHER CANDIDATES FOR CLT APPROACHES

The list of potential approaches, all related in some way to general principles of CLT, could become quite lengthy, depending on how you wish to narrow down your qualifications. Richards and Rodgers (2001) included Multiple Intelligences, Neurolinguistic Programming, the Lexical Approach, and Competency-based Teaching among their approaches and methods. Larsen-Freeman (2000) described the Participatory Approach, Learning Strategy Training, and Multiple Intelligences in her book on techniques and principles. Harmer (2001) adds Humanistic Teaching and the Lexical Approach to his list of approaches and methods. Just to be fair, we will take a brief look here at the Lexical Approach and Multiple Intelligences.

At the heart of the **Lexical Approach** is the hypothesis that the essential building blocks of language are words and word combinations, and that lexis therefore plays a central role in designing language courses and classroom methodology. Michael Lewis (1997) is perhaps the best-known advocate for a lexical approach to L2 teaching. His contention is not unlike that of Krashen (1997), who maintained that one can “do” almost anything in a language with vocabulary, and once those lexical units are internalized, other (grammatical and discourse) elements of language can be acquired, given a meaningful context. Lewis extends his approach to emphasize lexical phrases, or **collocations**, as central to a language course. Thus, phrases like *not so good*, *how's it going*, *easy does it*, *cover to cover*, and *I'll be in touch* are useful prefabricated patterns for a learner to internalize, along with certain predicable collocations like *do . . . my homework*, *. . . the laundry*, *. . . a good job*, *. . . lunch* and *make . . . some coffee*, *. . . my bed*, *. . . a promise*, *. . . a list*. The Lexical Approach has been considerably buoyed by the recent surge of corpus analysis, which now electronically provides literally millions of words and collocations within limited linguistic contexts.

A lexical emphasis has some obvious advantages. Sometimes in our penchant for communicative interaction, we overlook these basic foundation stones of language. And certainly a strategic language learner can accomplish a great deal with words alone. It remains somewhat unclear, however, how such an approach differs from other approaches (which certainly allow for a focus on lexical units). Nor is it clear how “an endless succession of phrase-book utterances, ‘all chunks but no pineapple,’ . . . can be incorporated into the understanding of a language system” (Harmer, 2001, p. 92).

Another possible qualifier as an approach lies in the current interest in the application of the concept of **Multiple Intelligences** (MI) to L2 teaching. As summarized in *PLLT*, Chapter 4 (pp. 107–109), Gardner's (1983, 1999, 2004) model of intelligence includes at least eight types of intelligence, which has led educators to view a number of forms of “smartness” that learners can manifest. A learner who is strong, for example, in interpersonal intelligence may thrive in the context of group work and interaction, while a student who has high spatial intelligence will

perform well with plenty of charts, diagrams, and other visuals. Most educators who follow an MI approach advocate the use of a multiplicity of types of activities and techniques in order to appeal to as wide a swath of learners as possible (Armstrong, 1994). The foremost champion of MI in the language-teaching field is Mary Ann Christison (2005), author of numerous books and articles on the topic. Her most recent guidebook for teachers offers some 150 different activities for language learners, each emphasizing a specific intelligence, coded for age and proficiency level (Christison, 2005).

The efficacy of an MI approach to language learning may be obvious. Clearly, learners differ from each other in many ways, and MI is one way of categorizing those differences. If teachers can be guided to recognize students' unique strengths and weaknesses through attention to MI, and can follow with appropriately geared activities, they will certainly enrich their language courses and will possibly enable students to better accomplish their purposes. One might contend that the eight intelligences are culturally biased (though they were originally intended to be just the opposite), or in some cultures contrary to prevailing educational practices. Others could argue that MI hypotheses lack the empirical rigor necessary to qualify as a true theory. Whether or not history will recognize MI as a fully developed approach remains to be seen. Whatever we call it, it remains a perspective that prods teachers to look beyond traditional school smartness to find avenues of success for every student in our classrooms.



Your approach to language teaching is obviously the keystone to all your teaching methodology in the classroom. By now, you may be able to "profess" at least some components of a personal approach to language learning and teaching and have a beginning of an understanding of how that approach enlightens—or will enlighten—your classroom practices. Many aspects of your approach will predictably mirror those that have been espoused here, especially since you are just beginning to learn your teaching craft. That's quite acceptable. But do keep in mind the importance of the dynamic nature of the theoretical stance of even the most experienced teachers. We have much to learn, collectively, in this profession. And we will best instruct ourselves, and the profession at large, when we maintain a disciplined inquisitiveness about our teaching practices. After all, that's how we got to this point after a century of questioning.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION, ACTION, AND RESEARCH

[Note: (I) Individual work; (G) group or pair work; (C) whole-class discussion.]

1. (I) Review the notion that your overall **approach** to language teaching can directly lead to curriculum design and lesson techniques, without subscribing

to a **method**, as the term was used in Chapter 2. Can you still comfortably use the term **methodology** to refer to pedagogical practice in general? As you read other research literature in the field of language teaching, pay special attention to how an author uses these terms. You will find some disparity in the various understandings of the terms.

2. (G) On page 44, a checklist of seven items was provided for readers to mentally respond to. Ask students to compare their responses with those of a partner. In pairs, they should talk about what contextual factors might cause one to change one's general inclination on any one or two of the items. Pairs will then present some of their discussion to the rest of the class.
3. (G/C) In anticipation of Chapter 4, in which readers will encounter 12 principles of language learning and teaching, ask students to brainstorm, in small groups, some assertions about language learning that one might include in a description of an approach to language teaching. For example, what would they say about the issue of age and acquisition; inhibitions; strategies for how to best store something in memory; and the relationship of intelligence to second language success? Direct the groups to come up with axioms or principles that would be relatively stable across many acquisition contexts. Then, as a whole class, list these on the board.
4. (G) Ask pairs to look at the seven features used as a general definition of CLT on pages 46–47 and to come up with some practical classroom examples of each of the seven factors. Should any characteristics be added to the list? or changed?
5. (G/C) Direct pairs to look again at the 22 characteristics of CLT (page 49) offered by Finocchiaro and Brumfit and to ask themselves if they are all in keeping with general CLT principles. Are they all sufficiently balanced in their viewpoint? Would students disagree with any of them? Pairs can share their ideas with the rest of the class.
6. (I/G) Have students observe an ESL class and use the characteristics as a gauge of how closely the lesson approximates CLT. Students should share their observations in small groups.
7. (I/G/C) Without looking back, students should write their own brief definitions of
 - task-based language teaching
 - learner-centered instruction
 - cooperative learning
 - interactive learning
 - whole language education
 - content-based instruction

Now, have them compare their definitions with those of a partner. If they are still confused by any terms, they should try to clear up the confusion through rereading and/or whole-class discussion.

8. (C) Ask members of the class to volunteer some examples from personal experience (learning or teaching) of the six types of teaching named above. How do your examples fit the types of teaching?
9. (C) Ask students to consider such approaches as the Lexical Approach and Multiple Intelligences. Do they qualify as legitimate, well-grounded approaches? What criteria are implied in deeming perspectives as approaches, as the term is used in this chapter?

FOR YOUR FURTHER READING

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Toward a postmethod pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35, 537-560.

Bell, D. (2003). Method and postmethod: Are they really so incompatible? *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, 325-336.

These two articles capsulize an interesting debate of a few years ago in which Kumaravadivelu asserted, as he had for a number of years, that language-teaching methodology was best characterized as a "postmethod" pedagogy. David Bell offered a thought-provoking response that put the discussion into a balanced perspective.

McKay, S. (2006). *Researching second language classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

In keeping with the notion of narrowing the historical gap between "theory" and "practice," Sandra McKay offers a highly useful introduction to classroom-based research. She includes a survey of types of research, a description of various methods of research, and guidelines for writing research reports and theses.

Lee, J., & VanPatten, B. (2003). *Making communicative language teaching happen* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

This professional reference book is a useful resource for teachers and teachers in training who would like a comprehensive view of classrooms operating under the principles of CLT. Sections of the book are devoted to teaching listening comprehension, grammar, spoken language, reading, and writing, all within a communicative framework. Connections between theory and practice are made.

Crandall, J. (1999). Cooperative language learning and affective factors. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in language learning* (pp. 226-245). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

JoAnn Crandall's summary of cooperative learning describes the affective underpinnings of this approach, with plenty of practical examples of cooperative learning at work in the classroom.

Stoller, F. (2004). Content-based instruction: Perspectives on curriculum planning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 261-283.

The Annual Review series is always a fruitful source of summary articles on selected topics. Fredericka Stoller's overview offers descriptions of research and outlines current practice in content-based instruction.

Skehan, P. (2003). Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching*, 36, 1-14.

Peter Skehan provides an excellent overview of task-based language teaching in this review article. An extensive bibliography is included.